Process Theology and Process Thought
in the Writings of Michael Servetus

Marian Hillar

Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies
Houston, TX

> *Quis obsecro, nisi penitus amens logomachias has sine risu toleraret? Nec in Thalmud, nec in Alchoran, sunt tam horrendae blasfemiae. Haec nos hactenus audire ita sumus alsuefacti, ut nihil miremur. Futurae vero generationes stupenda haec iudicabunt. Stupenda sunt vere, plusquam ea daemonum inventa, quae Valentinianis tribuit Irenaeus.*
>
> I implore you, who in his sane mind could tolerate such logomachias without bursting into laughter? Not in the Talmud, nor in the Qu'ran can one find such horrendous blasphemies. But we are accustomed to hear them to the point that nothing astonishes us. Future generations will judge them obscure. Indeed, they are obscure, much more than the diabolic inventions which Irenaeus attributed to the Valentinians. *Christianismi Restitutio, De Trinitate*, lib. I. p. 46.

> *Si locum mihi aliquem ostendas, quo verbum illud filius olim vocetur, fatebor me victum. Christianismi Restitutio,*
> If you show me a single passage in which the Son was called the Word, I will give up. *Christianismi Restitutio, De Trinitate,* lib. III p. 108.

Introduction

Until the middle of the XIXth century the world was considered to be static and not undergoing changes. The same was extended to the realm of ideas and especially to religious views and doctrines, which, it was believed, were established once and for ever. This was to be changed with the development of new evolutionary ideas which were applied not only to the external world where the process was originally discovered, but also to the ideology, and obviously to the religious thought. We came to the realization that religious ideology, theology, evolves with the rest of the human endeavors. Thus we can label the XXIst century as the century of evolutionary outlook. There are two, it seems so far, major directions of thought related to religion: 1.One is the critical study and reevaluation of the written sources of various religions, in Christianity in modern times probably initiated by Samuel Reimarus at the end of the XVIIth century. 2. The other one is a diversified movement which tends to accommodate the natural sciences to religious doctrines or religious doctrines to natural sciences, depending on whom we ask. As initiators of this type of approach we may consider Pierre Theilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne.[1]

---

[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*, (New York: The Free Press, 1985. First published in 1929). Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000).

One of the key theoretical issues in the first movement is the traditional trinitarian dogma. The incendiary character of this issue was already feared by Erasmus. In his 1972 exhaustive study Edmund J. Fortman, a Catholic theologian, summarized it this way:

> The formulation of this dogma was the most important theological achievement of the first five centuries of the Church ... yet this monumental dogma, celebrated in the liturgy by the recitation of the Nicene creed, seems to many even within the Church to be a museum piece, with little or no relevance to the crucial problems of contemporary life and thought. And to those outside the Church, the trinitarian dogma is a fine illustration of the absurd length to which theology has been carried, a bizarre formula of 'sacred arithmetic.'[2]

Fortman's study was followed recently by that of yet another Catholic theologian, Karl-Joseph Kuschel, and Anthony F. Buzzard.[3]

The second movement occurs in two varieties: A. One is the broad based and popular attempt at unification of the natural sciences and religious speculations; B. The other is more restricted, based primarily on philosophical speculations, the so-called process theology or process thought. Of course, there are several other trends with a much broader perspective of evaluating traditional religions as such, but this is beyond the goals proposed here.

A.   From the side of theologically oriented natural scientists or scientifically oriented theologians there is a trend to use the natural sciences as a standard against which all theological speculations can be now evaluated. This trend is exemplified by the spreading movement supported by the Templeton Foundation which has one goal only – to prove scientifically that God exists. The title of the award given yearly by the Foundation reflects this attitude: The Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. Of course, this is a subterfuge, because the Templeton Foundation knows perfectly well that science cannot prove anything like that. Some scientists openly admit that they are believers in some kind of Christianity (or other religious systems), but that they do not have any evidence or that they believe in spite of not understanding the theological, religious premises. Others on the other extreme of the spectrum, like Paul Davies, who, when talking about various design schemes for the universe says: "I accept the fact that all the physical systems that we see, from the biological realm right through to the galaxies, are the products of natural physical processes and I would not use the word design in connection with those." When asked how he visualizes God he answers "First of all I try to avoid using the word "god.".... I have in mind something like that rational ground in which the laws of physics are rooted. My position is the rational ground on which the order of the universe is rooted, but the crucial quality here is that this rational ground is timeless. ... what I am talking about is something beyond space and time, so this is not a god within time, not a god to whom you can pray and have something change, because this god is a timeless being ... If you want to use the laws of physics to explain how the universe came to exist, then these laws have to transcend the universe – they have to exist in some sort of timeless

---

[2] Edmund J. Fortman*, The Triune God* (New York: Baker Book House, 1972).

[3] Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity. Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* (San Francisco, London, Bethesda: International Scholars Publications, 1999). Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time ? The Dispute over Christ's Origin,* transl. by John Bowden. (New York: Crossroad,1992).

Platonic realm, and that is what I really do believe."[4] And he rejects religion based on the Bible classifying it as a sort of "madness."

Process Metaphysics and Theology
B.   1. The philosophical basis for "process theology"[5] comes from the theistic metaphysics developed by Whitehead and modified by Hartshorne. The intention was to develop a metaphysical "theory of everything" which considers Reality as a dynamic evolutionary series of events called **"actual occasion"** or **"actual entity."** These events which occur temporarily are interconnected in such a way that they **influence each other** and partially are **self-created**. But each event or actual occasion is a result of a **physical function** related to the detection of the physical reality of other events described as **feeling** or **"prehending"** and the **mental function** which is described as detection or "prehension" of **abstract possibilities** of the universe or the so-called **eternal objects**. The actual occasions are not isolated separate events but they are an internally related network with the dipolar structure and prehension in every event. This prehension is not an intelligent act except in the higher forms of life.

The mechanism of succession of the actual entities which is the process, occurs in following way. Every actual occasion analyzes the past prehensions and adds something new as its own contribution to the cosmic process, thus realizing the so-called **subjective aim**. Once this happens the actual entity ceases to exist and becomes a source of data for subsequent entities. Reality is thus a process of related occasions or momentary experiences.

Therefore, in this system the concept of a persisting substance is replaced by the concept of a "root" or "nexus" of occasions with common characteristics or qualities.

2. Theology in this system considers God as a main exemplification of the principles by which all things are explained. He is the **supreme actual entity** and gives to each of the entities an **initial aim**, **limits their creativity**, **sets their subjective aims**, **prehends all entities** and is prehended by them as well. This divine nature is described as the **"primordial,"** **"transcendent,"** or **"mental pole."** In addition God has an **"immanent nature"** which is also described as his **"physical pole"** by which he takes all events into his divine life in such a way that the world exists in him. In this way we may say that he gives the entities their objective immortality, being himself the only entity with subjective immortality and, at the same time, he grows with the changing world. Whitehead felt he had to incorporate **eternal objects** i.e., abstract possibilities or values to be realized. Yet there must be something actual to grasp these eternal objects and that can act as a universal agent and source of order allowing the world to act within a certain range of freedom. This is what he called God.

In the Hartshorne modification, the dipolar nature of God was emphasized and the concept of the eternal objects was discarded. God's **mental pole** which is his **abstract nature** stretches through eternity with his attributes that are necessarily and eternally true. On the other hand, his **immanent** or **consequent nature** is that quality that God acquired by interaction with the world in particular circumstances. God in this model is a "living person" also undergoing a succession of divine events.

---

[4] Paul Davies, Traveling Through Time. A Conversation with Paul Davies. *Research News & Opportunities in Science and Theology* July/August 2002, Vol. 2, 11/12, 8-11.
[5] This summary is primarily based on that given by D.W. Diehl in "Process Theology, Process Theism." http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/process.htm

In this model God, though he is still an absolute, immutable, independent and infinite being, is placed in a temporal process, creative and dependent upon the free decisions of his creatures. His perfection is understood now in terms of his social relatedness where he responds to all creatures in every event (his love). God grows with the evolving world but he does not know the contingent events.

Highlights of Michael Servetus's Theology

Servetus is one of the most important and most misunderstood geniuses. What most people know about him is that he did not believe in the Trinity. This is not correct because he developed a different concept of the Trinity in conformity with and based on his analysis of biblical history. The criteria of truth in the Servetus system are biblical data, empirical observations as a confirmation of the biblical data, philological analysis of the sacred texts, and philosophical illustration. His main work is *Christianismi Restitutio*,[6] *Restoration of Christianity*, in which he single-handedly developed a new Christian system of theology and religious practice is solely based on the scripture. He looked to philosophy and empirical observations only in order to gain confirmation of his biblical deductions. The first part of *Christianismi* in five books entitled *De Trinitate* is the most important for understanding his theological system.

In the first book Servetus discusses the three propositions concerning the person of man in Jesus Christ: that Jesus the man is the Christ (the Anointed); that Jesus the man is the Son of God; and that Jesus the man is God. The second book analyzes the scriptural statements in order to elucidate what they actually say about Christ. The third book discusses the prefiguration of Christ in the Word, the vision of God and the hypostasis of the Word. The fourth book concerns the significance of the names of God, his omniform (all-creating) essence (*essentia omniformis*) and principles of all things, followed by a review of various philosophical doctrines about God. The fifth book covers the topic of the Holy Spirit.

We shall review now the basic concepts in Servetus's theology.

GOD, HIS TRANSCENDENCE, HIS MANIFESTATIONS, HIS COMMUNICATION, AND HIS IMMANENCE

God in the Servetus system is understood from several perspectives. One is his "abstract nature" or "mental pole," which is, according to the terminology of process thinkers, as much as he is in himself incomprehensible, unimaginable, incommunicable for us, infinitely transcendent to everything. Hence, nobody may have any exact idea of him, nor may see him, if he himself does not accommodate himself to us through manifestations under some form or modes which would be proportional to our capabilities. Moreover, through these manifestations God interacts with humanity directly. The other mode of interaction is through communication which we receive in our spirit in a perceptible form. This occurs through spiritual manifestation of the Holy Spirit acting within us. These modes of God's manifestation and communication belong to his "physical pole" as it relates to humanity and always exhibiting his loving kindness toward men.

These various modes of divine manifestations took place in the context of human history and were revealed through his names. Servetus states that the most distinguished names of the divinity are Elohim and Yehovah, one of Christ and the other of the Father. He interprets Elohim

---

[6] Michael Servetus, *Christianismi Restitutio*, Vienne, 1553. Reprint by Minerva G.m.b.H,, Frankfurt a. M., 1966.
There is a Spanish .translation by Ángel Alcalá and Luis Bétes, Miguel Servet, *Restitución del cristianismo*,
(Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, Madrid, 1980). It contains valuable explanatory notes.

as designating God and his Word, but he says that more precisely Elohim as plural represented man Christ but God in nature. Yehovah is the name most appropriate for God as it represents God in his essence, whereas Elohim represents God in appearance. The other modes of manifestation included various visible forms, visions, and voice, e.g., when God gave his Law. But they were always veiled as through "window blinds." Finally, Servetus states, God manifested himself to us in a luminous way beyond any obscurity, and in order to be seen with his face unveiled, "His Word became flesh and we saw his glory." "We saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Christ. We saw Christ and in him we saw the Father. In him we saw the light, God shining himself." This was the corporeal God's manifestation in his substance bringing men to God.

God's immanence in the natural world is related to his universal and omniform essence. Servetus explains that God created corporeal and celestial elements out of nothing through his Word which is a manifestation of his substance – uncreated light, also identified with the substantial prefiguration of Christ man. The elements assume next their secondary forms and undergo transformations from and through the action of the primary form which is celestial light, God himself. The corporeal things of the world are thus united to the incorporeal God in a certain mode by his substance, which we say is the light itself of his Word. God is then distributed, but is not destroyed. Similarly the spiritual things are fused into one spirit with the Spirit of God. In this way we may say that God's light is the form of forms and mother of all forms (*Lux illa Dei, forma formarum. Lux mater formarum).*

In this Servetus's ontological scheme there is no emanation, but creation. Second, the transcendental unity does not affect the ontological order only the intentional, thus Servetus cannot be accused of pantheism.

THE WORD (ALSO IDEAS, WISDOM, AND LOGOS)

Right from the beginning Servetus denounces the traditional Word of God as the second and real Person (in an ontological sense) and a Son of God. Traditional trinitarian doctrine visualizes the existence of separate cosmic, metaphysical, and noetic entities that by some unintelligible way are one, each one is another one, each is a full divinity, and all together are one divinity.

The Word was one of **God's manifestations** in the past and is identified with God's essence which can be symbolized by light, fire, and spirit. The Word therefore was in God and there was no other subsistence or hypostasis. It reflected the image and phenomenal (not ontological) person of Christ as prefigured from eternity in God's plans. Thus the pronouncement of the Word by God is the generation of the celestial Christ from eternity which is the same as the eternal generation of his body, though not in the corporeal sense but only by representation. This is so because the temporal aspect applies only to the corporeal things and men, so that the earthly Christ in a human body had a temporal generation. With the generation of the earthly Christ the Word ceased to exist as God's manifestation. God recovered it only after the resurrection of a glorified Christ. The Word and this Christ is an aspect of the creative power of God that actively sets the "**subjective aims"** and sets the "**limits of self-creativity"** to natural occasions.

Servetus identifies also the Word with the God's ideas of all things radiating in his Wisdom like in an archetypical world. God saw in himself, as light, all things in his proper light like reflections in the mirror.

CREATION, SELF-CREATION

Servetus developed a very sophisticated model of creation based on the biblical story, but accommodating the current knowledge about the structure of matter and the world. It is enough to say that creation was reduced to the formation in the beginning of the elements earth, water, and light. All the rest was formed afterwards by transformation from nonbeing to being. This transformation though, controlled in the final analysis by the divine primary form, light, it has a degree of **self-creation** and thus **creativity**, with **limits** set by the qualities endowed to the elements by the divinity.

JESUS CHRIST (REAL AND NATURAL SON OF GOD)

The essence of Christianity for Servetus is the divine paternity of the man Jesus Christ and this aspect of his doctrine was picked up and developed by antitrinitarian groups in the XVIth century. But Servetus develops a trinitarian doctrine in which Jesus Christ as a human being was the naturally engendered Son of God, anointed (Christ) for the salvation of mankind. At the same time, he was a temporal and visible medium through which God wanted to reveal himself to humanity in an authentic, true way, without impediment, and to interact directly with humanity. He was a historical intervention of and manifestation of God, and of God himself in the corporeal world. His essence was produced by the fusion of the divine substance with the corporeal elements. God is the true Father of Christ because from his substance Christ was generated in a natural way (*substantialiter genitus, sicut tu a patre tuo … vere et naturaliter genitus*). Servetus admits also that Christ had two natures but he understood this in a different way from the traditional. In Christ the two natures are united in one substance, in one body, a new man. The divine nature of Christ depends on how we understand the Word which is not a person, but a divine mode. Servetus understands it in a realistic way as a divine vocal manifestation, a pronouncement of which is equal to God's imparting his essence as a seed, and by mere biological inheritance all his divine attributes. At the same time, Christ's spirit is God's Spirit hypostatically and substantially, thus he has divinity in both ways, corporeal and spiritual.

Servetus emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and not the Word. Apostles never speak of more than one God, who is the Father and Jesus Christ as his Son. It is important to pay attention to when the Word and when the Son are said, because they are distinct things. Servetus concludes: "If you show me a single passage in which the Son was called the Word, I will give up. But, on the contrary, I say with the Scripture – before his Word, now his Son, before in the Word the person (as a phenomenological representation) of the son. (*Olim verbum, nunc filius. Et olim in verbo personam filii*).

STRICT UNITARIANISM

Servetus arrives at the conclusion opposed to that of the trinitarians who postulate three invisible metaphysical entities in one single essence (being) and nature of God as if in one point there were three points. On the contrary, he says, there is only one reality, but it contains essences (beings) of infinite thousands, and natures of infinite thousands. Not only is God innumerable in terms of things to which he communicates his deity, but also in virtue of the modes of his own deity.

But there an essential double divine mode and preformed from eternity which is the mode of plenitude of substance, immeasurable, realizable corporeally in the body and spirit of Jesus Christ and in the manifestation of God in his Word, the other is communication of God in his Spirit.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Just as the Word is the essence of God inasmuch as God manifests himself to the world, so the Holy Spirit is the essence of God inasmuch as God communicates with the world. And this communication is intimately linked to the manifestation. The key idea of created man, the Christ was in the Word, so the key idea of the created spirit, the spirit of Christ, was in the Spirit (Divine). In the Word of God was his Spirit. Spirit and Word had the same substance but distinct modalities (*modus diversus, Dei essentia quatenus manifestatur, quatenus communicatur*). In Christ thus there was a unification of the superior elements with the inferior, addition of the spirit of man to the Divine Spirit. For this reason the Holy Spirit imparted to us proceeds also from God and from the Son.

CONCLUSIONS

Servetus developed his theological system entirely from his analysis of the scriptures. This contrasts with the modern process thought that derives entirely from metphaysical speculations. He looked for confirmation of his assertion in the philosophical systems and in the empirical knowledge of the world available to him. He anticipated speculations of modern process theology in all of their essential points. With some adaptation of modern knowledge about the natural world and modernization of terminology, his system is still valid and should be considered.

* * *